

United States Department of the Interior

Bureau of Land Management

Royal Gorge Field Office

3028 E. Main Street

Cañon City, CO 81212

Environmental Assessment

Salida Area Trail Systems – New Trail Construction

DOI-BLM-CO-F02-2015-0017 EA

December, 2015



IDENTIFYING INFORMATION

PROJECT TITLE: Salida Area Trail Systems– New Trail Construction

PLANNING UNIT: Salida

LEGAL DESCRIPTION: New Mexico PM; T50N, R9E Sections 28,32,33; T49N, R9E Sections 7,8,9,15,16,17,18; T49N, R8E Section 13

APPLICANT: Salida Mountain Trails and Bureau of Land Management

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

BACKGROUND:

The BLM is preparing an Environmental Assessment (EA) to analyze the impacts of adding new non-motorized trails to the Arkansas Hills Trail System and the Methodist Mountain Trail System. Both areas are in the Salida subunit as defined by the Arkansas River Travel Management Plan (2006) and are adjacent to the city of Salida.

The 2006 TMP recognized that unlike other subunits studied, “the largest demand in the Salida area is for more hiking and bicycle trails, which is largely an effect of demographic make-up of the town's population.” The demand has continued to grow as the number of miles of new sustainably built trails has increased. In 2010 BLM devices counted over 10,000 users passing a single trail junction; by 2013 that number had grown to 17,286. Prior to the 2006 TMP mountain bikes were allowed to ride off of existing travel routes. The approval of the TMP restricted mountain bikes to approved roads and trails only, creating additional demand for new trail.

The Desired Future Conditions (DFC) described in the TMP are:

1. Maintain and improve public land health.
2. Enhance recreation opportunities.
3. Provide appropriate and reasonable access

For the Salida subunit the TMP DFCs included a desire to see visitors travel via a well-managed system of designated trails that are being maintained to limit adverse impacts to vegetation, soils, and water. This outcome is being fostered through a long term partnership with Salida Mountain Trails (SMT) a 501c3 all volunteer organization whose mission is to design, build and maintain non-motorized, multi-user trails on the public lands near the city of Salida. To date, SMT has created a 23 mile system of new sustainably built trails (using IMBA standards), while rehabilitating some of pre-existing social trails, and closing those that were beyond repair. In fiscal year October, 2013 through September, 2014 SMT volunteers contributed over 2,700 hours to trail building and maintenance and the organization spent in excess of 20,000 dollars on professional trail building services. SMT has over 160 dues paying members and receives additional financial support from Salida, Chaffee County, and local businesses.

In December, 2013 the city of Salida purchased 80 acres adjoining BLM land. This purchase provided a legal egress for a trail originally approved in the 2006 TMP. This purchase also provides an opportunity to create new trails connecting city and BLM land.

PURPOSE AND NEED:

The community of Salida's primary recreation management goal for the trail network is to enhance the economy of the Arkansas River Valley by creating a destination trail system connected directly with the community. A subsequent goal is to enhance the quality of life for local residents by providing close to town recreation that offers opportunities for the whole family with opportunities for skill progression. In order to meet these goals this network should provide mileage sufficient for diversity in difficulty, length, and while at the same time mitigating impacts to other resources. The network must be logical, easy to navigate, provide loops, and provide a high quality experience. The purpose of the action is to better meet the trail network goal by improving trail connections, adding mileage to the system without significantly enlarging the current footprint, and enhancing the trail users' overall experience by offering a full range of trails for beginner to expert cyclists and hikers.

Due to its proximity to downtown the Arkansas Hills area trails gets heavy use from hikers, dog walkers, trail runners, and mountain bikers. In addition, it is utilized for running and mountain bike races associated with the FIBARK festival and the Run Through Time marathon. While this stacked-loop system currently offers trails of a great variety and range of difficulty, it could be vastly improved through the judicious addition of several connectors and short new trails that would greatly enhance the user experience without significantly enlarging the foot print of the current system.

The Methodist Mountain trail system currently consists of the Little Rainbow Trail, the Double Rainbow trail as well as feeder trails on the east end (Lost, Dead Bird, and Race Track). This system has excellent county road access via the 110 trail head or an intersection with CR 108. While some riders create a loop by riding from town, the majority of riders and almost all hikers drive to either starting point and use the trail as an out and back. While this trail is the area's best beginner riding and great contour hiking, it is limited due to its linear nature. The trail user experience could be vastly improved with limited increased land use by building several loop trails in the area that could be used as stand-alone trails or serve as connectors to these existing trails. These additions would create a true stacked loop system with opportunities for hikers, runners, and riders of all abilities to have an enjoyable and safe adventure.

The Methodist Mountain area is also home to the iconic Rainbow Trail. The Rainbow Trail is one mile south and 1500 feet higher in altitude than the Little Rainbow and contained within the National Forest. The US Forest Service (USFS) with the support of Salida Mountain Trails recently completed the Columbine trail to the east of the Methodist Mountain area and has expressed an interest in constructing a connection between the Rainbow and Little Rainbow in the Sand Gulch area. This trail would be on USFS land. This future connection in conjunction with the following proposed trails would greatly expand and enhance the stacked loop system and provide all day or multi-day hiking and riding opportunities.

PROPOSED ACTION

The BLM in cooperation with Salida Mountain Trails propose to add additional trails to the Arkansas Hills Area and the Methodist Mountain System to better meet the communities desired goal of creating a destination trail system that is connected directly with the town of Salida. While concepts for specific trails have been identified, this document is also intended to be somewhat programmatic allowing for future connections both within the trail system itself and connections from adjacent land managers. Once specific on the ground locations are identified for trails or other features, site specific resource inventories would be conducted. Concepts for identified trails are outlined below along with criteria for adding additional trails to the system.

Methodist Mountain Area Proposed Trails

Spartan Trail:

The Spartan Trail's objective is to create beginner/intermediate loops connecting the existing Little Rainbow, Skull, and Double Rainbow trails to extend saddle time while avoiding the need for out and back riding thereby improving the rider or hiker's experience and reducing the number of contacts with other groups. Additionally, while one section of this trail will maintain the wide track of the existing Little Rainbow trail allowing all rider levels a loop option, the other side of the circuit will be narrower single track but will maintain the "low exposure", safe riding environment of the Little Rainbow. This section will allow the beginner rider an opportunity to safely build confidence and act as a bridge to the more challenging Double Rainbow trail which has narrower tread as well as more exposed terrain. This trail will also offer alternative lines where a rider can attempt some rock obstacles in a low exposure setting building confidence and skill.

As reflected in its' name (Salida High Spartans) this trail will provide an excellent training venue for the high school mountain bike team which currently does all their riding in the Arkansas Hill trails due to the greater trail connectivity in that area. This intermediate loop is proximate to the school and would offer an excellent training alternative.

As a beginner/intermediate trail appropriate for families and inexperienced riders, hikers trail runners, and casual walkers this trail will be maintained to avoid large loose rocks and other obstructions. All intersections shall be signed. This trail will be approximately 2.6 miles.

Sole Train:

The Sole Train trail's objective is to provide the intermediate/advanced and expert rider a downhill, flow trail that will offer higher speed riding, providing tabletops, berms and possibly wood constructed jumps depending on soil conditions. Alternative lines will be provided to allow the user to avoid these features if they desire, thus allowing riders of differing skill levels to enjoy the excitement provided by the fast, smooth downhill tread. This trail will have a suggested direction of travel (downhill). This trail will be approximately three feet wide and have average grades of 6% but be considerably steeper in appropriate sections. The intention is to design this trail to generally follow IMBA's flow trail standards. Please see the following link: <https://www.imba.com/flow-country/trail-characteristics> .

Sole Train will not only provide an exciting, downhill, feature filled experience but will also terminate close to or at the Opal and Harold Trail that is planned for the Vandaveer Property owned by the city of Salida. The Opal and Harold Trail will follow the existing irrigation ditch line back to the Burmac Trail head and/or a safe crossing of Highway 50 allowing for loop rides or direct from town riding. Sole Train will be used both by down-hill thrill seeking riders but also by riders, runners, and hikers looking for a challenging and extended loop close to the city limits.

As designed, Sole Train will incorporate a short portion of the Little Rainbow trail. To avoid user conflicts, signs warning of two-way/slower traffic will be posted. Foreseeing that some trail users may opt to shuttle the lower portion of Sole Train to maximize their downhill riding time, a small parking area off County Road 108 may be required. The specific location and design of the trailhead would be coordinated with Chaffee County.

This trail will climb to the National Forest Service boundary and therefore may provide an option for a future connection to the Rainbow Trail.

As a flow trail, Sole Train will be maintained to keep a smooth tread and features will be groomed to keep them in their designed condition. Total mileage will be approximately 2.7 miles.

Castle Rim Trail:

The Castle Rim Trail will offer additional beginner/intermediate, loop riding and hiking from the Burmac Trail head area. More importantly the objective is to provide views of the unique geologic features of Castle Gardens while avoiding disturbance of the rare flora and fragile soils found in the canyon itself. This trail will stay on the east rim of Castle gardens and then loop back to the intersections of Little Rainbow, Sole Train, Deadbird, and Race Track through an area that already contains a motorized BLM road as well as the power line access road. The unique flora, fauna, and geology would be interpreted through a variety of mediums ranging from kiosks, web, maps, and possibly signing along the trail. If legal access is obtained this trail may also access Highway 50 near Salida East to provide access from that area and creating an additional large loop option. An additional spur may also connect with the adjacent sub-division if desired. The trail will provide either a stand-alone loop or may be combined with any of the aforementioned trails to create an extended, more challenging ride/run/hike.

As a beginner/intermediate trail, the tread will be machine or hand built to a width of 18 to 24 inches. Most exposure will be minimal. Some natural obstacles such as rocks or roots may be left to challenge riders. Interpretive signs will be constructed of high quality, long lived, and tamper resistant materials. The trail will be maintained to keep those features as designed. All weather and user wear damage will be repaired. Total mileage will be approximately 3 miles.

Race Track future reroute:

Race Track is a long existing trail that was integrated into the current trail system during the Travel Management planning process. The overall trail management goal is to be an easier/more challenging trail that is enjoyable climb and descent when connecting with the Little Rainbow Trail. The current route of this trail lends itself to continue weather related erosion and the trail which was originally conceived as the easiest route up or down to or from the Burmac trail head has become more challenging for riders and less pleasant for hikers over time. While it may be possible through frequent maintenance to keep the current alignment, re-routing large portions of the trail may be deemed the best management option.

Arkansas Hills Area Proposed Trails

Sand Dunes/Unkle Nasty Connector

Unkle Nasty was designed as an advanced trail with formidable rock drops and steep technical riding. Sand Dunes is also a challenging trail but is suitable for the intrepid intermediate rider. This trail also provides excellent views of Methodist Mountain and the peaks south of Salida. The vast majority of mountain bikers use these as downhill trails. These trails currently are under-utilized because access requires an arduous climb up CR 173, as well as the high difficulty found on sections of Unkle Nasty. A trail connection between the upper ends of these two trails, and the addition of the North Backbone/Pauli Connector Loop (see following item), will greatly increase riding and hiking options in this area. Rather than a long ride up followed by a relatively quick descent, trail users will be able to make a loop of Sand Dunes/Unkle Nasty/Pauli or use Sand Dunes and the new connector to avoid some of the most difficult terrain on Unkle Nasty. This link should attract more users to existing trails and improve the trail experience for both riders and hikers.

This connector will maintain a similar level of difficulty found on Sand Dunes and Unkle Nasty and be maintained commensurately. Significant obstacles, loose surfaces, steeper grades, and large drops

will be present. However, the trail will contour between the existing trails so grades will not be steep on average. Mileage will be approximately .25 miles.

North Backbone/Pauli Connector Loop

The North Backbone trail is an intermediate trail that provides for longer excursions for mountain bikers who ride CR 175 from Salida but is also used as an out and back trail for hikers who generally drive to the trail head. The proposed loop trail will provide new options for both user groups. Hikers will be able to use the loop to vary their experience while cyclists will have improved access to Sand Dunes, Pauli, and Unkle Nasty. (see above item) as well as a challenging stand-alone trail.

This trail will be upper intermediate to advanced and travel through dramatic terrain. Steep grades, travel over rock out crops, and significant exposure will be present. This trail will appeal to the ambitious mountain biker or hiker looking for new challenges. This trail will be maintained to keep its advanced features and will be approximately .77 miles long.

Sunset Trail

This is a social trail of long standing which intersects CR 173 at the junction of Lil' Rattler and Backbone about one hundred yards south of the North Backbone intersection. It is located perfectly to provide access from all of these trails to Spiral Drive, Front Side and the Chili Pepper trails.

As a non-system trail, Sunset has not been maintained and is currently used infrequently by hikers and mountain bikers. The objective is to create a valuable connector to trails leading back to town and provide an alternative easiest/more difficult trail option to riding Spiral Drive road to connect with the network from town. In its unmaintained state and current alignment, this trail is upper intermediate to advanced in nature and generally only desirable for downhill traffic. Options would be explored to re-align the trail to better fit the trail management objectives of easiest/more difficult trail that connects with the greater system. This could include city owned land as well as BLM managed lands. It is understood that due to steep side slopes in the area this management objective may be hard to meet and it would end up as more difficult.

Lower Sand Dunes/Tenderfoot Connector

The objective of this trail is to allow hikers and bikers using Sand Dunes to return to town without trespassing on Union Pacific property and will additionally allow trail users to link to many of the Arkansas Hills trails (Tenderfoot, Backbone, Frontside, etc...) without having to descend to the base of the system. This area is used by the Salida High School mountain bike team and this trail will create an excellent loop option for their training rides.

This trail will be a beginner/intermediate trail. It will generally follow a single contour and therefore will not have extended steep grades. This trail will be maintained so that the tread is free of large obstructions, excessive loose material. The tread will be sufficiently wide to allow the beginner rider a secure ride in exposed areas. This trail will be approximately .26 miles long.

South Backbone/Lowry Open Space Loops

The objective is to create two easiest/more difficult trails to provide access to city property (formerly Lowry) that was recently acquired with the express purposes of providing legal egress for South Backbone and creating additional recreational opportunities. Without these trails, South Backbone must be used as a one-way terminating in an advanced ride out through Sweetwater Gulch or an out and back experience. These loops will allow for extended saddle time and provide excellent views of the Arkansas River and city of Salida.

These trails will be on both city and BLM land. Approximate mileage: .82 miles on BLM.

General

Additional Trail Criteria

As identified in the purpose and need, the community of Salida desires the trail systems to become a regional destination to assist with economic development. In order to do this the trail system must provide a variety of logical loops that are easy to navigate and appeal to a wide range of users. With this being said, it is understood that as trails are added to the system through this proposed action unforeseen opportunities for simple connections or additional trails may present themselves. Below are criteria that would be used to evaluate if a trail is appropriate to incorporate into the system through this proposed action. If a proposal for additional trails outside of these criteria is proposed, additional analysis would be warranted.

- It is within the general foot print of the existing trail systems.
- It meets the overall goal of the trail system.
- It has a clear and demonstrated need within the context of the overall goals.
- It does not drastically alter the overall setting (physical and social) of the area.
- It is considered a relatively short connection, not a new stand-alone trail.
- There are not highly controversial concerns with impacts to other resources.

Trail Construction and Management Guidelines

All trail construction will generally follow International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) trail guidelines and standards to provide high quality trails. These include but are not limited to:

1. A trail's grade should not exceed half the grade of the hillside or side slope where it is located unless located on a suitable surface (i.e. bedrock);
2. An average trail grade of 10 percent or less is most sustainable;
3. Maximum trail grade should not exceed 10-20 percent and should be based on considerations such as soil type, number and type of users, and annual rainfall;
4. Frequent grade reversals (such as rolling dips, drainage dips, etc.) should be used to promote drainage of water; and
5. Trail tread should be out sloped (5 percent recommended) where appropriate to encourage water to sheet across and off the trail.

Full standards can be found at:

<https://www.imba.com/resources/trail-building/designing-and-building-sustainable-trails>

Trail width will vary from 18 inches to over 3 feet and will be built either with hand tools or machines depending on the trail objectives and design requirements. If gasoline powered equipment is used for construction, an adequate spill kit and shovels would be on-site during project implementation.

All trail mileages and representation on maps are conceptual at this time. Final design will deviate from the identified distances and map representation.

Trails will be well signed to aid way finding for visitors as well as indicate non-motorized use only. To minimize user conflict trail heads will display "yield to" signage. Trail closure/area restoration signage will be used to close non-system trails and short cutting. Trails that are not part of the system will be rehabilitated, signed accordingly and monitored. Trail head signs will encourage all users to stay on designated trails only.

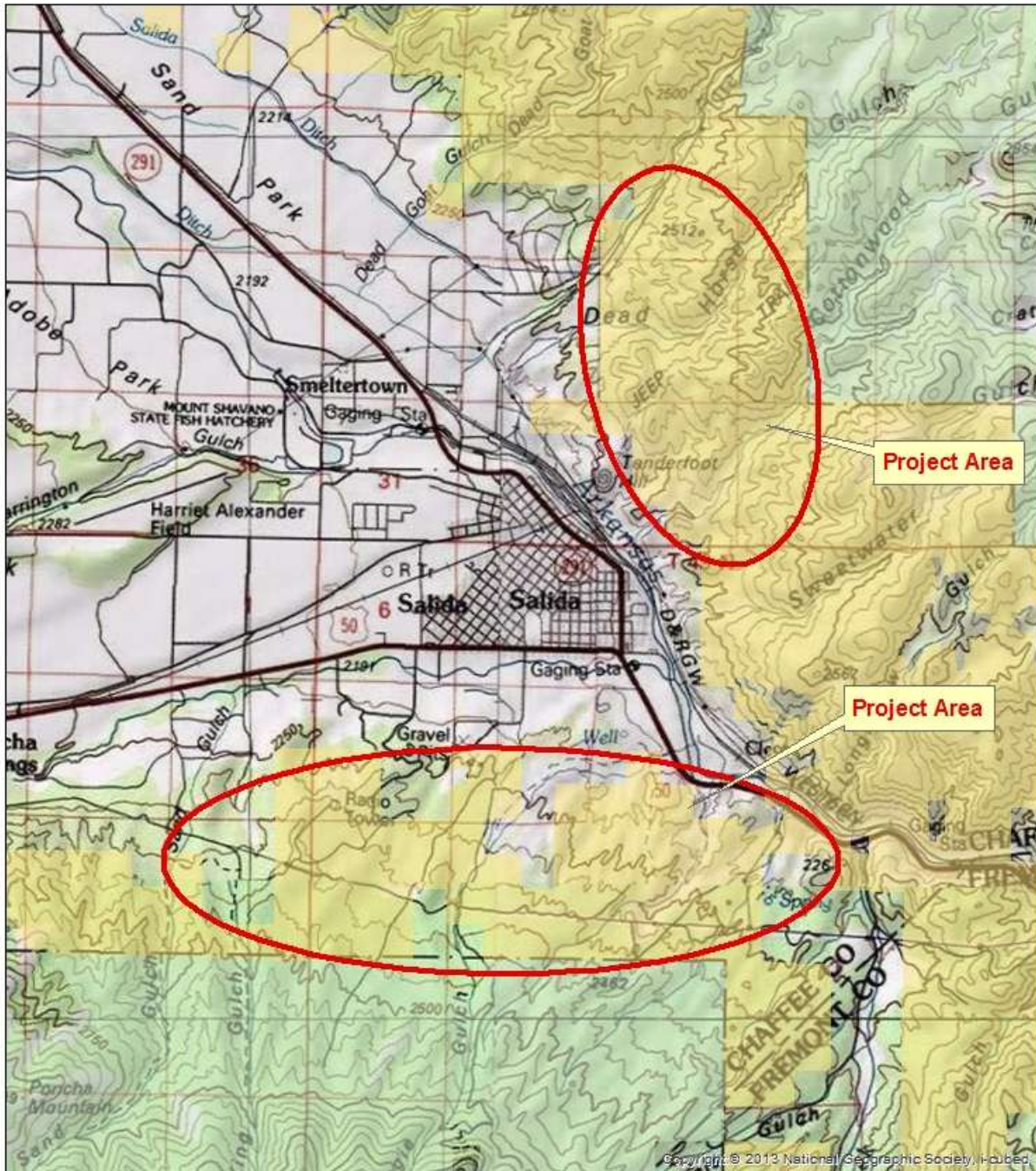
A trail stewardship/adoption program will insure that appropriate maintenance is carried out and any

trail short cutting or non-permitted trail building is reported. Noxious weeds, if detected, will be removed by volunteer crews at 'shindig' events. Additional treatment measures may also be warranted.

Where practical the trail corridor will be cut to permit open sight lines to reduce user conflict.

Where armoring is used to stabilize tread, horse and foot traffic will be taken into consideration. Alternative (man-made) products may be used or secondary lines provided where natural rock might be inappropriate.

Construction activities requiring vegetation disturbance would be avoided from May 15 through July 15. This is the breeding and brood rearing season for most Colorado migratory birds.



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December, 2014

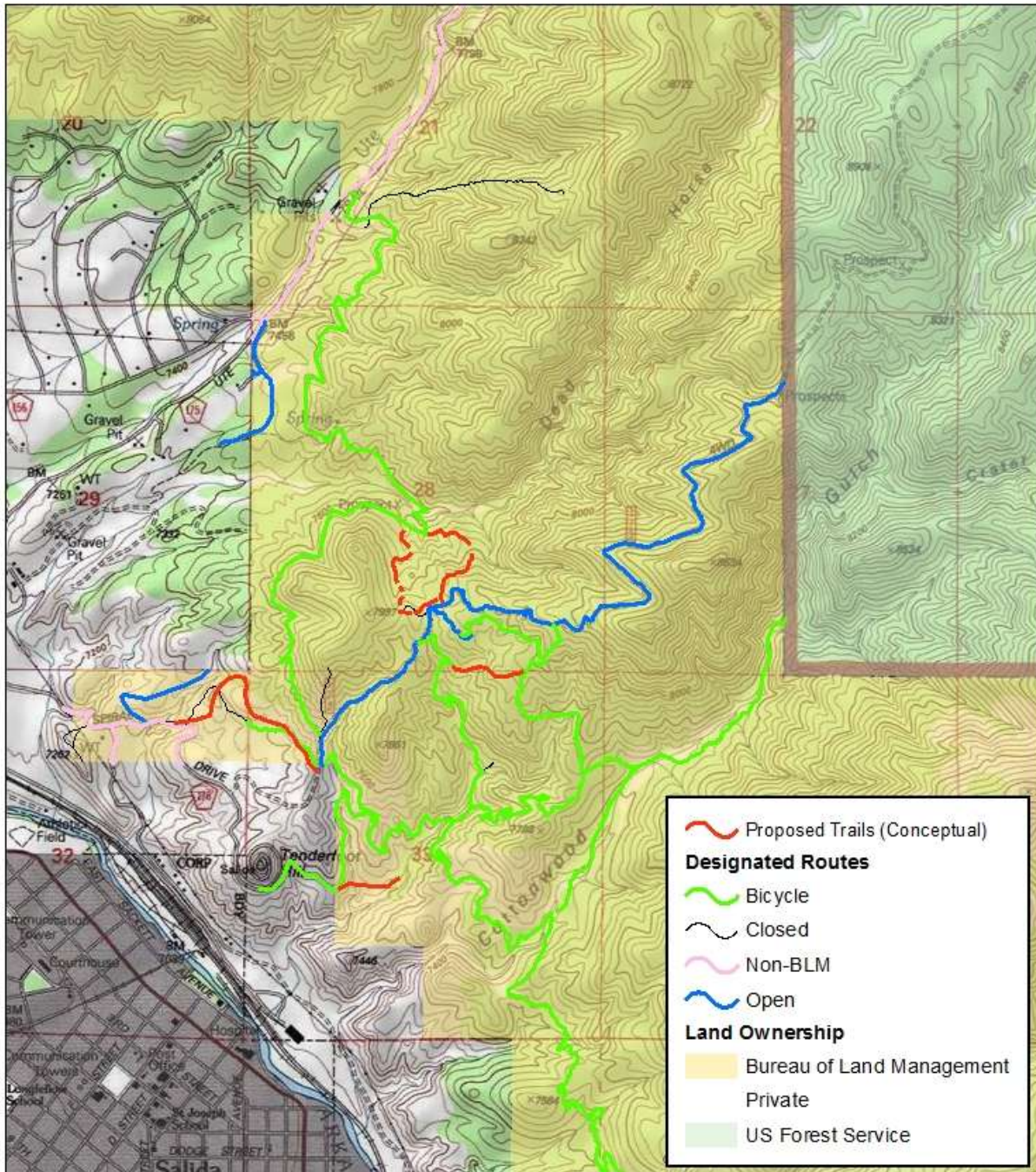
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T49N, R9E Sections 7, 8, 9, 15, 16, 17, 18
T49N, R8E Section 13

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Miles



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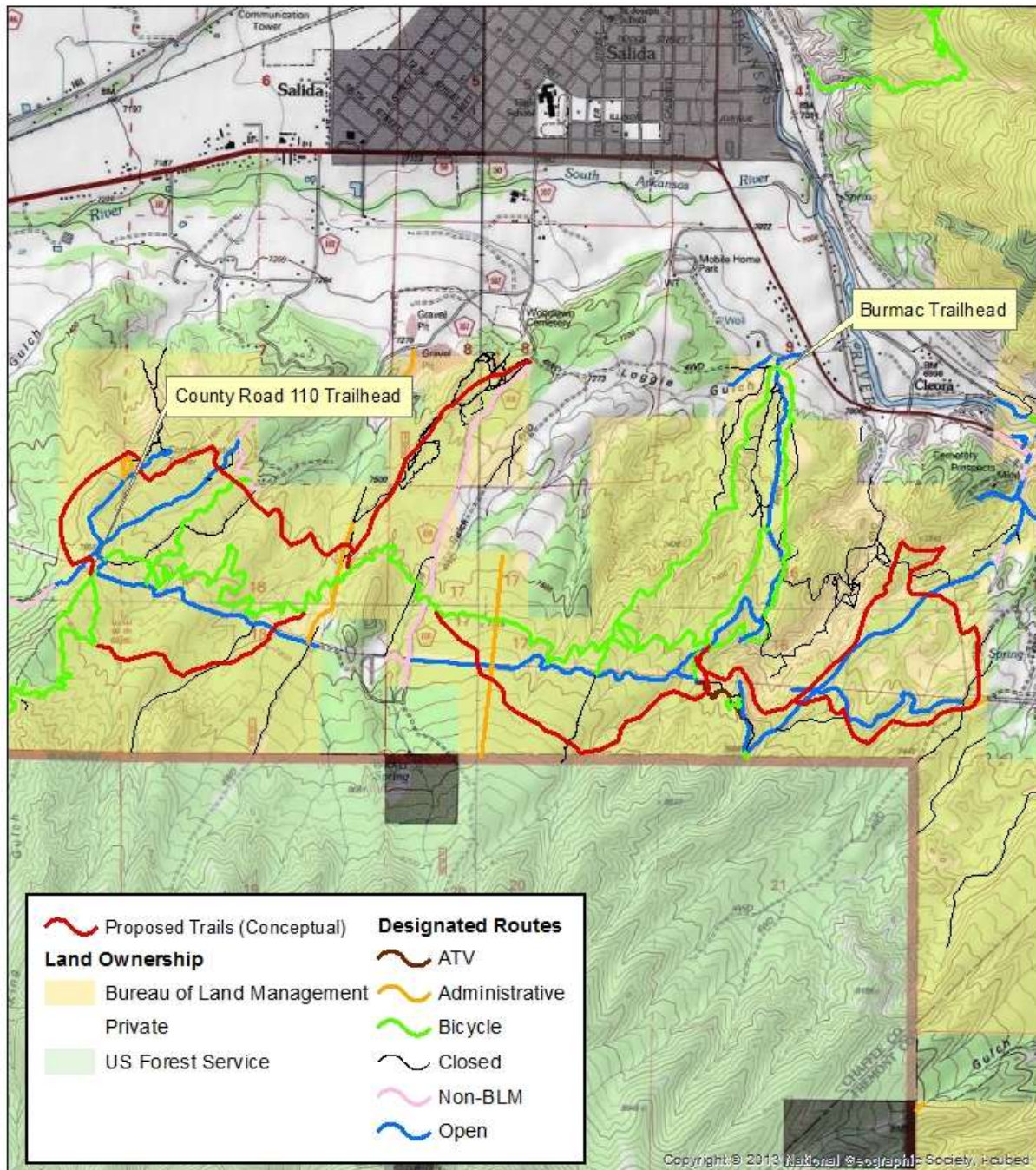
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T49N, R8E Section 13

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Miles



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